

TESTIMONY OF PHILIP W. HASELTINE
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BEFORE THE TRANSPORTATION, AVIATION AND MATERIALS SUBCOMMITTEE
OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the National Academy of Science's study of the costs and benefits of the national 55 mile per hour speed limit. I am Philip Haseltine, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Policy and International Affairs.

I believe the results of the study fulfill the purposes outlined by Congress in the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982. The committee established by the National Academy of Sciences should be commended for doing its job well and for providing a useful service to government decision-makers. It is far and away the most complete appraisal since the 55-mph speed limit was enacted in 1974, and must be considered in any future discussion of speed limits. The Department of Transportation is actively considering the study's findings, but is not yet prepared to respond to its recommendations.

At the outset, let me state that the Department agrees with the essential finding of the study that the 55-mph speed limit has saved thousands of lives each year. The study illuminates the relationship between speed and the frequency and severity of crashes: higher speeds allow less time for drivers to react, particularly on roads with limited sight lines; they increase braking distances and make the vehicle harder to control; and they lead to higher impact speeds. As the speed at impact increases, the crash severity increases with the square of the speed, so that an increase of only a few miles per hour can dramatically increase the risk to vehicle occupants.

The relationships between speed and crash severity and frequency have long been known to those concerned with highway safety. Campaigns against speeding have been waged since the earliest days of the automobile. But it was the 55-mph speed limit, with its immediate and nationwide effect on fatalities and injuries, that really brought the point home for the American public. Other factors, such as reduced travel and the economic downturn in 1974, also contributed to the effect, but the study concludes that the reduced speeds and the smaller speed variance were key factors in the decline in highway deaths. The study estimates that the speed limit saved from 3,000 to 5,000 lives a year in the early years, and from 2,000 to 4,000 lives a year thereafter. It predicts that savings will continue into the future. The awareness of this benefit probably accounts for the continued high level of public support for the 55-mph limit which is described in the study.

However, we are also concerned that the level of support for the 55-mph limit varies widely among the regions of the country and among different population groups. Observance of the speed limit on the road does not always match the expression of public support in polls. The level of enforcement also varies from area to area, perhaps in recognition of the different levels of public acceptance. Differing approaches to enforcement can lead to cynicism about the law, a development that we must work to prevent.

The NAS study recommended that the 55-mph limit be retained, but the members of the committee were divided on whether the speed limit should remain intact on all roads. Some favored increasing the limit on selected roads, such as rural Interstates, while others pointed out that to do so could cost up to 500 lives and would consider increasing the limit only if other safety measures were implemented to offset the effects of higher speeds. The committee's report leaves this issue unresolved.

The committee also raised questions about the appropriate method for measuring a State's compliance with the speed limit, and recommended that the Department consider a method other than the straight calculation of the percentage of motorists exceeding 55. It was the committee's view that this method counts all violations as being equal and therefore fails to take into account widespread tolerance of minor violations and does not encourage sufficient enforcement attention to the more serious violations.

Within the Department, we have set in motion an intensive effort to review the Committee's findings and recommendations and to develop appropriate policy options. The potential options range from keeping the 55-mph limit intact on all roads, an option reflecting the generally high level of support in public opinion polls for 55, to allowing a higher limit on certain roads, based on the characteristics of those roads, such as the rural Interstate highways mentioned in the study. Other options might include allowing higher speeds on certain roads in States that take other safety measures, such as increased enforcement or the enactment of safety belt use laws, to offset the effect of the higher speeds. The options could also include adjustments in the method of measuring compliance to place more emphasis on serious speed violations, as recommended by the NAS study. We are examining the pros and cons, as well as the benefits and costs, of each potential action.

When we complete our work, which we intend to do promptly, the Secretary will have a framework within which to respond to the NAS report. If her decision requires administrative or legislative changes, we will so advise the Congress and will work closely with the appropriate Congressional committees to implement them.

This completes my prepared testimony. If you have questions, I would be glad to answer them.